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Factsheet

What to think about before getting a cat



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This factsheet is designed to help you and your family think about the issues involved in deciding to give a home to a cat.

A cat can be a great addition to your household and rehoming a rescued cat can be incredibly rewarding.

Here at Battersea Dogs & Cats Home we receive over 2,000 unwanted cats every year, so we are all too aware of the heartbreak caused by having to give up a pet. We therefore encourage you to think carefully before making the decision to take one on.

Cat ownership requires commitment. You must be aware of all aspects of responsible cat ownership such as health care, vaccinations, behaviour, feeding, play and stimulation and identification (microchips, discs).

Considering a new addition to the family

These are all questions that must be answered beforehand, not only for your sake but for the cat you are about to take on.

Cats cannot be let outside when they are first rehomed-how do you feel about having a litter tray in your house?

Do you have any other pets? Would they have problems with a new arrival?

How much experience of cats do children have, that will come into direct contact with your cat?

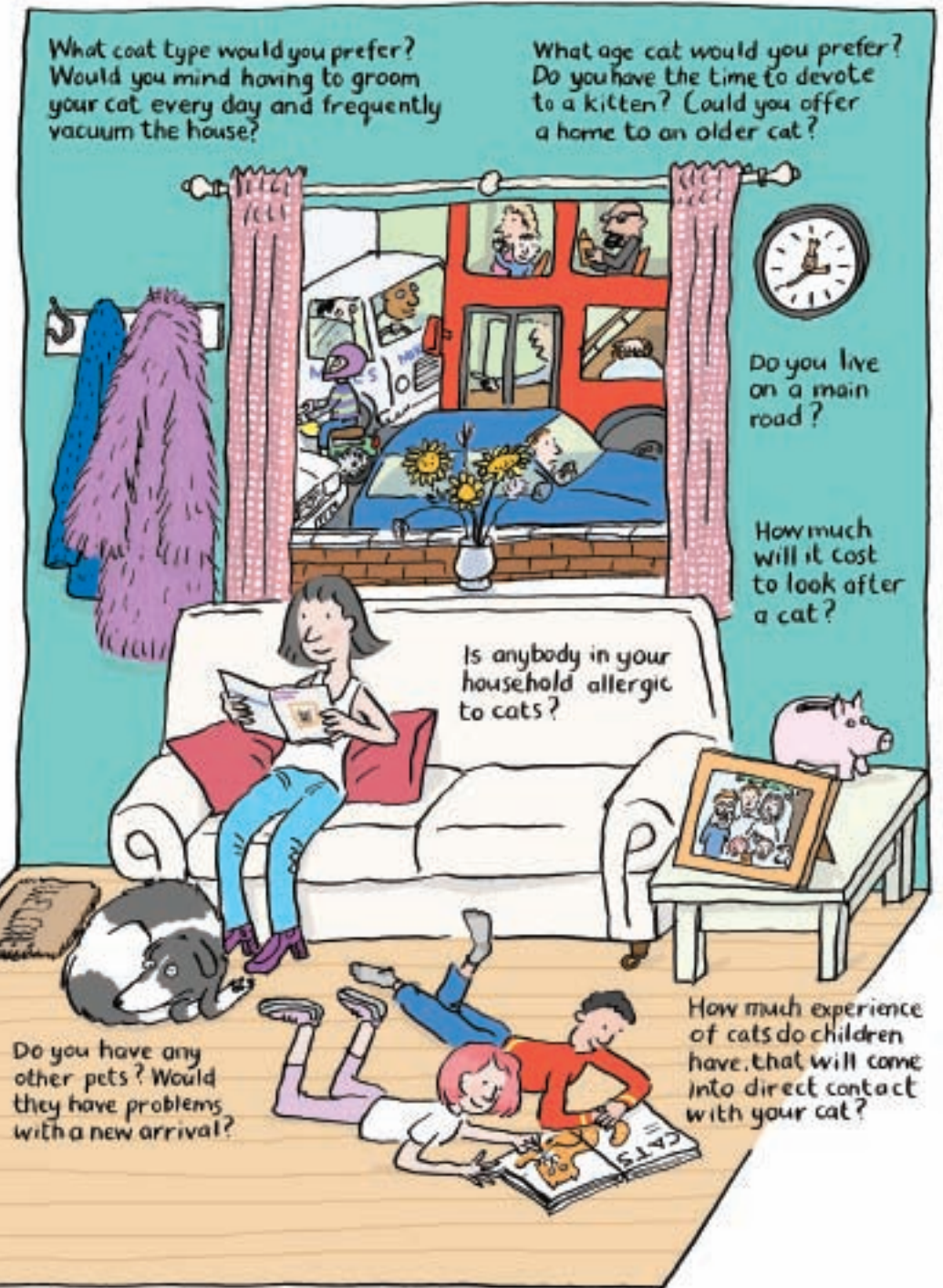
What coat type would you prefer? Would you mind having to groom your cat every day and frequently vacuum the house?

What age cat would you prefer? Do you have the time to devote to a kitten? Could you offer a home to an older cat?

Do you live on a main road?

How much will it cost to look after a cat?

Is anybody in your household allergic to cats?



Physical attributes

Male or Female?

The decision about whether to have a male or female cat is not as important as some of the other factors; mainly because all our adult cats are neutered and kittens will only be rehomed to owners willing to have them neutered at the age of six months. As a result of neutering, secondary sexual characteristics rarely need to be considered as the difference in behaviour between the two sexes remains minimal.

If you have a cat already and are considering getting another, you need to think about the needs of your existing cat. Does he or she actually like the company of other cats? If so, would a male or female be a more compatible companion?

Age

Kittens

Kittens are great fun but do require more looking after than older cats. If you are thinking about rehoming a kitten up to four months old, make sure you have plenty of time to spend with her, as a kitten should not really be left alone for more than three hours. It is important that she gets fed regularly, four times a day, with the correct amount of food.

Litter training is a must and should initially be supervised. Playtime must also be supervised and rough games with other kittens should be stopped immediately to prevent bullying or injuries.

Kitten owners need to be particularly vigilant about health, as a kitten's health can deteriorate quickly.

Adult cats

A healthy adult cat is certainly the easiest cat to look after as she will probably enjoy spending a fair amount of time outdoors exploring, hunting and socialising with other cats. As a result she will not require constant attention and will be quite happy to be left alone for longer periods of time than a kitten. An adult cat is therefore the ideal pet if you work full time and lead a busy lifestyle.

An older cat can have an enjoyable and rewarding life – do not assume that she'll spend the day sleeping. Older cats are often surprisingly active, happy to go out and chase insects, and are still inquisitive about their surroundings. It is also a myth that you cannot build a close bond with an older cat, she can be just as loving as any cat.

Every cat ages at a different rate, with some cats showing signs of ageing at about eight years and others not until they are 14 or 15 years old. The normal signs of ageing seen in cats include a general reduction in activity levels, sleeping more, becoming sensitive to extremes of temperature and sometimes becoming more vocal.

As an older cat has a less effective immune system and is therefore more susceptible to disease and illness, you should be vigilant of any sudden changes in your cat. If you notice any dramatic changes in appetite, drinking or weight loss, take her to be examined by your vet immediately. It is sensible to weigh your older cat once a month and consult your vet on an appropriate diet.

Coat type and grooming

Most cats look after themselves pretty well. They groom themselves regularly and methodically, after meals and when they come indoors. Cats who have a friendly relationship will sometimes groom each other – always a pleasure to watch!

Medium and long-haired cats should be groomed by their owners daily to prevent furballs which cause them to vomit. Brushing and combing regularly, apart from removing loose hair, will also remove dirt, dust and grass seeds and help to prevent the formation of unsightly and sometimes painful hair mats.

Short-haired cats may require some help if they do not clean themselves adequately, but do not require the daily grooming of medium and long-haired cats and are therefore ideal for people with a busy lifestyle.

However, it is important to remember that cats love to be brushed and pampered. Daily grooming is a great way to ensure that you devote time exclusively to your cat, to build the bond between you. It is recommended that you start socialising, handling and grooming your cat at an early age, so she becomes accustomed to it.



Other things to consider

Indoor cats

The most common reasons for keeping a cat indoors are that her owner lives in a high-rise flat and is unable to arrange for easy access to the outdoors, or that the owner lives on a busy road and feels their cat would be safer confined indoors. Although indoor living suits some cats, others will find it stressful and will not adjust well to this lifestyle.

If you are planning to keep your cat inside, you will need to provide her with a replacement for the stimulation and activity she would receive from free roaming. For example, chasing and jumping, a very natural action for a cat, can be triggered with toys on a string, small balls and furry mice. A high scratching post will allow her to climb, jump and use her claws. You can also make your cat work for her food by scattering and hiding it, so she uses her sense of smell to search out the reward. Owners of indoor cats need to spend far more time entertaining their cat as they will be her main source of mental and physical stimulation. A good motto for indoor cat owners is 'make them work and keep them active!'

Litter tray

Cats often prefer a certain location for their litter tray and may even have a preference for a certain type of litter. In order to avoid accidents you must keep the litter tray as clean as possible and put it in an area with some privacy. Always put a separate tray down for each cat – not too close together. Think carefully about the surface it is on as cats often like to scratch the area around the litter tray after they have used it and may not be able to scratch a cold cement floor.

Temperament traits

The temperament of the cat most suited to you will depend on your personal experience with cats. You must consider the time you have available to interact with your cat and the level of commitment and care you are prepared to put in to make your cat happy. For instance, if you lead a busy lifestyle your ideal cat would be a confident, friendly, adult who is affectionate but independent enough to be left alone for some time during the day.

Good with children?

It is very important to consider temperament when bringing a cat into a household with children, or if children visit on a regular basis. Confident, friendly cats, as a rule, are the ideal choice to live in a household with children as they tend to be relaxed, happy to play and enjoy being stroked. A shy cat, on the other hand, would probably feel threatened by the presence of active and playful children and would be happier in a quiet, adult household. It is important to impress upon your children the need to respect the cat's independence and to teach them to be good pet owners.

Cost issues

To keep your cat healthy and happy you must be prepared to incur some expenses.

Initially you will need to get your cat microchipped for easy, reliable and indisputable identification. Feeding your cat will cost £25–£30 per month but could prove more expensive if your cat falls ill and requires a vet-prescribed diet. If you have an indoor cat you will have to provide a litter tray and cat litter. Bedding, scratchposts and toys will need to be replaced fairly frequently.

Yearly vaccinations, flea treatments and wormers are a must. Pet insurance can also prove cost effective for vet treatment of illness and injury. You may also need the services of a cat-sitter or boarding cattery if you go on holiday.



Responsible cat ownership

In order to be a good owner it is important to consider your cat's perception of the world. Her enhanced sense of smell, hearing and touch, coupled with an innate desire to hunt make the cat a unique species with specific needs. As owners of domestic cats we must appreciate that they retain many of the behavioural characteristics of wild cats and although domestic cats may share our lives, we do not have a total level of control over their existence.

Any good owner should give their cat the opportunity to engage in as many natural behaviours as possible. Cats are social creatures but they are also solitary hunters who are ultimately responsible for their own survival. As a result they need to feel in control, so smothering your cat with affection could backfire. The key to a successful relationship is to step back a little, appreciate your cat as a highly adapted, solitary hunter and ensure that the daily care you provide enables her to express this natural behaviour.

And finally...

This information is not meant to try and put you off taking a cat, but we hope it will help you to make an informed decision that leads to a long and happy relationship.

There are many places to get a cat, but please make sure that you choose your new cat from the best possible source. We'd recommend a well-known rescue organisation such as Battersea Dogs & Cats Home.

Whatever cat you choose, and wherever you get her from, the most important thing to remember is that this relationship is for life – and hopefully your cat's life will be a long one. In taking on a cat you are taking on a long-term commitment – make sure you're ready for it.

For further advice on cat behaviour in general, please call our Behaviour Advice Line on 0905 020 0222 (calls cost 25p per minute from a BT landline, other networks may vary). Opening hours are Monday – Friday. 12.00 – 5.00pm.